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WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Regional Meeting for Asia
Bangkok, 29 March-2 April 1993

Opening statement by His Excellency Mr. Chuan Leekpai,
Prime Minister of Thailand

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government and the people of the Kingdom of Thailand, may I first of all extend a warm welcome to all the distinguished delegates, I should also like to welcome Mr. Ibrahim Fall, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations for Human Rights Affairs and Secretary-General of the World Conference on Human Rights, Mr. John Pace, Coordinator of the World Conference on Human Rights, as well as the distinguished representatives of the many regional, international and non-governmental organizations present here. I am confident that with your collective wisdom and active participation, this historic meeting will yield fruitful results, making concrete and meaningful contributions to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

Like many other countries in this region, Thailand has been moving steadily towards greater democracy. Naturally, this process had to overcome whatever obstacles along the irreversible path of democratization. But our society has always emerged stronger after every challenge. Our sight is set on the higher horizon of human rights. By this, I am referring to the growing awareness in Thailand of an individual's rights and fundamental freedoms as well as of one's duties to society. Ordinary people are aware of how these concepts--abstract as they may be--affect their everyday life. The inherent inter-relationship between human rights, democracy and development has become clearly visible. The need to keep a fair balance between those fundamental components becomes even more urgent. This is particularly so in the time of greater political and economic uncertainties in our world today.

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For Asia to succeed and play a more prominent role on the world stage, we must ensure that our peoples are provided with their rights and freedoms as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We must strive for a world where, among other things, everyone--man or woman--is born free and equal and is entitled to the same rights and freedoms without discrimination. We must strive for a world free of fear and want. We must aim for a world free of discrimination not only among individuals but among nations.

I believe that the path towards these ideals lies through economic development, democratization and social justice. In this regard, I cannot stress enough the importance of the right of the peoples and nations in Asia, as everywhere else in the world to develop--as reflected in the Declaration on the Right to Development and to detemrine their own destiny free from interference from the outside.

Economic development alone though, is not enough. For economic growth to be sustainable in the long term, social development and the universal value of human rights and fundamental freedoms must also be enhanced. This can only be achieved through the accelerated, but balanced, realization of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, as solemnly enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the International Bill of Human Rights, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is toward these ideals that my Government is striving. My Government is determined to take appropriate steps and measures aimed at guaranteeing further the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Thai people. Towards this end, my Government is undertaking the necessary steps for Thailand to accede to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, one of the two covenants contained in the International Bills of Human Rights, thus consolidating further the efforts made by previous Thai Governments.

As declared in my Government's policy statement, we have accorded higher priority to the rights of the child, as well as those of women and vulnerable groups. The same applies to our decentralization and income distribution policy which aims not only to alleviate poverty put also to provide better education and social services to our rural population. Without fairer distribution of income, the ideal of social justice will only be illusory.

On the part of the Thai Parliament, a parliamentary Committee on Justice and Human Rights has been recently established. This Committee will afford elected parliamentarians the opportunity to consult actively with governmental agencies on key human rights issues now before us.

To effectively protect and promote fundamental human rights, the authorities must abide by the rule of law. Justice must not only be done but also seen to be done. The rule of law will serve as a guarantee against abuse of powers. Furthermore, the law of the land must be strictly enforced and complied with. Only with the actions of both the authorities and the ordinary people could sanctity of the law be upheld. Without such sanctity, the human rights could not evolve in a peaceful, harmonious, and secured manner.

Although a society's human rights values can only evolve at its own pace, cooperation can and should be provided by the international community. Indeed, international cooperation should aim at overcoming poverty and ignorance which are the main obstacles in the promotion of human rights in developing countries. Here, I believe education and training in human rights at the national, regional and international levels, are crucial if we are to increase our peoples' awareness of human rights.

Asia itself should cooperate more closely in the field of human rights, especially in the exchange of information and education. In the past, it was the civilizations of Asia that gave birth to great religions of the world, so we are no stranger to human rights and the nobility of human spirit. We could help shape and refine international standards and norms for the promotion and protection of human rights.

The role of non-governmental organizations is welcomed. Dialogue between governments and non-governmental organizations on the basis of shared values and commitments could generate public awareness and grass-root participation.

Furthermore, the many organs of the United Nations concerned with human rights, particularly the Centre for Human Rights, should be given increased suport and encouragement. This is essential if they are to better respond to our needs in the field of human rights.

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This Conference should serve to underline the fact that there is only one set of fundamental human rights for whatever part of the world. It should also eliminate the misconceived idea that human rights in a more economically developed region of the world are superior to those in a less economically developed region. Perception of rights does not exist in pure air. It is a result of complex inter-actions between several groups in the society. Therefore, it is natural that approaches to the implementation of fundamental human rights vary because of differences in socio-economic, historical, cultural backgrounds and conditions. The promotion of universality of human rights would be more effective if there is a clear understanding and recognition of such differences. Changes to human rights must emerge primarily from within and not imposed from the outside. Human rights should also evolve at their own pace if they are to be peaceful and sustainable.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now have the honour of declaring open the Asian Regional Meeting on Human Rights. In wishing you success in the days ahead, I am confident that the outcome of this meeting will help us not only crystallize our views on human rights, but also promote the unversality of human right itself. Let us work for cosultation, not coercion; concrete actions, not rhetoric; and harmony, not disruption.

Thank you.